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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KATHMANDU 002223

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS  
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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [NP](#)

SUBJECT: NEPAL: BRIGADE COMMANDER SAYS MAOISTS SLOWLY  
WINNING

REF: A. (A) KATHMANDU 379

1B. (B) KATHMANDU 1741

Classified By: DCM ROBERT K. BOGGS. REASON: 1.5 (B,D).

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) At a briefing at 3rd Brigade Headquarters in Pokhara November 20, Brig. Gen. Prakash Basnet told DATT and poloff he believes the Maoists are "slowly winning." After making significant inroads against the Maoists during the first three months of the state of emergency (late November-mid-February), the Army has since lost the upper hand. The insurgents are better organized and more unified than the Government of Nepal, and are manipulating "weak and cowardly" elements within democratic society to push for dialogue. Only the Maoists and the Army are working, in the Brigade Commander's view; civilian government functions in only about 20-30 percent of his area of operation. Basnet said he lacks sufficient manpower and mobility to defeat the Maoists and has received no resources to implement Integrated Security and Development Program (ISDP) projects in his area. End summary.

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THE VIEW FROM THE WEST  
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12. (SBU) On November 20 DATT and poloff attended a briefing offered by Brig. Gen. Prakash Basnet, Commander of the 3rd Brigade headquartered in Pokhara (approx. 210 km northwest of Kathmandu). Basnet's AOR covers more than 39,000 square kilometers, includes 16 administrative districts, and is home to 4.6 million Nepalis. The brigade is composed of three infantry battalions; one engineering battalion; one headquarters battalion; and seven independent infantry companies, located at 61 different outposts. (Note: Independent companies are nearly twice the size of battalion companies, with 235 soldiers vice 135. End note.)

13. (C) Basnet said he believes the Maoists are "slowly winning" the fight in his area. During the first three months of the state of national emergency (Nov. 26-mid-February 2002), Basnet used helicopters to deploy his troops in an aggressive campaign against Maoist insurgents in the 16 districts in his AOR. The Maoists suffered serious reverses as a result, Basnet asserted, and much of their Central and some their Western Commands were shattered. The tide turned after the Maoist assault on the district headquarters in Achham on February 17, however, when the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) began moving its limited air assets to other priority locations (e.g., the 11th Brigade in Kathmandu and the Western Division). Without helicopters, Basnet says he has lost the mobility needed to maintain the offensive advantage against the insurgents. The civilian government also failed to provide adequate resources to mount a credible campaign against the insurgents, he charged. The Maoists used the monsoon to recruit, retrain and regroup, he asserted, and are gradually rebuilding their Western Command. (Note: When asked if the Brigade was receiving more resources since the King dismissed the previous government, Basnet said that he had been given wire to build perimeter defenses. End note.)

14. (C) Large portions of his AOR remain under effective Maoist control, Basnet acknowledged. Only district headquarters and a few other larger towns are safe. Even the Chief District Officer (CDO) in Pokhara's Kaski District--considered one of the safest in the country--cannot visit all the Village Development Committees in his jurisdiction. The rest of the territory--including some sites with RNA outposts--are dominated by the Maoists at night. In Baglung District, for example, two of the sites with RNA garrisons are safe only during the day. When soldiers enter a town on patrol, the Maoists disappear. At night, however, when the soldiers return to the barracks, the Maoists return to the villages. Local government has largely ceased to function, except in the district headquarters, according to Basnet. Police have, for the most part, also

withdrawn to locations fortified by the RNA.

15. (U) Since the beginning of the insurgency in 1996, the 16 districts in Basnet's AOR have suffered the destruction of:

- 400 VDC buildings;
- 6 telecom repeater stations;
- 3 power stations;
- 15 schools;
- 24 health posts;
- 30 banks;
- 30 forestry posts;
- 24 post offices;
- 50 police stations;
- 14 state-owned corporation offices;
- 30 government vehicles;
- 1 bridge.

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FAULT OF CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT  
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16. (C) For Basnet, responsibility for the RNA's failure to counter the Maoists thus far lies squarely at the feet of former democratically elected governments. Self-interested and corrupt politicians (and, he implied, civil servants) were not serious about allocating enough sufficient financial and human resources to fight the Maoists, he alleged. For example, the Brigade was never given funding to implement the envisioned Integrated Security and Development Program (ISDP), even though Gorkha--originally intended to be the ISDP showcase district--falls within his AOR. Civil servants do not perform their assigned functions. As an example, he noted that the RNA brought the bodies of policemen killed in a Maoist attack in April to the district hospital in Gorkha--only to find that not one of five government doctors assigned to the hospital was in town. The bodies eventually had to be brought to the Brigade headquarters in Pokhara for post mortems. Basnet estimates that only about 20 to 30 percent of the 917 Village Development Committees (VDCs are the smallest unit of local government) in his AOR are currently operating. Only the Maoists and the RNA are working, he stated, indicating that ordinary people therefore feel abandoned by their government. "Are we winning hearts and minds" this way? he asked rhetorically. Intelligence resources up to the state of emergency were poor, he contended, because successive democratic governments had been using the National Intelligence Division (NID) as a repository for party hacks for the past 12 years.

17. (C) The Maoists successfully exploit the internal bickering and tendentiousness commonplace among mainstream politicians, thereby preventing the development of a strong domestic political consensus against the campaign of terror, he said. "We are not united as the Maoists are," he observed, adding that the insurgents have successfully integrated political, military, psyops, and social elements into their operational campaigns. Even now, he charged, the insurgents are manipulating "weak and selfish and cowardly elements of democratic society" into pressing the Government of Nepal (GON) for dialogue, instead of supporting the RNA in its fight. The militants have co-opted members of human rights groups, newspaper editors, teachers, and "the ICRC," along with assorted sociopaths and criminals, to promote their ends, and have highlighted the GON's continued failure to address the grievances of "ethnically disadvantaged" groups, such as Tamangs, Magars, and the lowest castes, for recruitment purposes. (Some of the 60,000 ex-Indian Gurkhas now living in the AOR have also provided training and funding to the Maoists, Basnet said; India has been actively assisting the GON in helping stop this.) Thus, the Maoists now "feel the national situation is changing in their favor," he concluded.

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NEEDS: TRAINED MANPOWER, MOBILITY, COMMO  
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18. (C) "The Maoists know very well our weakness," Basnet complained: lack of adequate manpower and sufficient mobility. Because the Maoists only stay two days in any given location, RNA troops need to be able to move quickly to use intelligence on insurgent whereabouts, Basnet said. When the 3rd Brigade had more helicopters, they were better able to interdict Maoist movements and training. With only limited air assets available since the attack on Achham, the Brigade's mode has shifted to primarily a defensive one. In addition, Basnet estimates he needs 14 battalions (he now has approximately 7) to counter the insurgents effectively. The troops must be better trained, he added, noting that the amount of time new recruits spend in basic training has been cut by two months. Once they graduate from basic training, recruits and other soldiers receive little on-duty training, he confirmed.

9. (C) The RNA has a 900-officer deficit at the mid-ranks, and the NCOs are weak, Basnet lamented. Weapons are not the most critical need when troops lack appropriate fire discipline, he pointed out. When Maoists launch nighttime attacks on RNA fixed positions, Basnet said, they typically use socket bombs, which are only about 50 percent reliable. In these situations, the soldier forgets his training and, panicked, will try to fire 300 rounds from one self-loading rifle (SLR). RNA soldiers will continue firing at an enemy they cannot see until they run out of ammunition and/or the weapon jams--which is virtually inevitable under these conditions, Basnet observed. Once the Maoists determine the soldiers are indeed out of ammunition, they lead a more targeted assault to overrun the position. More basic training with basic weapons and tactics is needed, he emphasized.

10. (C) Basnet cited secure communications as another urgent need. When Maoists attacked the district headquarters in Arghakhanchi on September 7 (Ref B), Basnet called in air support for beleaguered troops on the ground. (As Brigade Commander, his entire communication resources consisted of one telephone line and one radio.) But because the helicopter had no way to communicate with the ground forces, when it finally arrived, it began firing on RNA positions. Basnet was, in turn, unable to communicate with the helicopter pilot, and instead had to call the airport tower in Kathmandu to contact the tower in Pokhara to pass the message to the pilot.

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PLANNING  
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11. (C) Basnet, who had just returned that day from meeting with the Chief of Army Staff, said he was unaware of the existence of any national campaign plan. He has visited all of the 61 RNA positions in his AOR, and has moved the district headquarters in Arghakhanchi (which was overrun in September) to a more strategic position atop a hill. He does not believe the development of village militias in government-controlled areas is a useful concept for Nepal right now. If the national police cannot even adequately defend a town--police attacked on November 15 in Gorkha held out for only 15 minutes, he charged--how can villagers be expected to?

12. (C) According to Basnet, the Maoists plan to surround all district headquarters (where the RNA maintains fortified positions). The Maoists have consolidated their previous three regional commands into two (the Central Command, according to one captured Maoist document, had supposedly been infiltrated by "traitors"), and are steadily rebuilding the loss of trained cadre in its Western Command, Basnet fears. The militants have written a development plan for Rukum and Rolpa Districts, Basnet believes, and reported having seen evidence suggesting Maoists are building a road in Gulmi District. A document captured recently from a Maoist detainee also indicates plans to levy a two percent tax on all government employees; to destroy village-level infrastructure; to continue a series of nationwide strikes, or "bandhs," and to disrupt any plans for local or national elections.

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COMMENT  
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13. (C) Blaming the failures of successive democratic governments for all the problems of Nepal today--including the RNA's inability so far to counter the insurgency--is a common refrain among Army leadership. Whether the interim government appointed by the King will succeed in marshalling more resources for the fight--defense spending had already risen to an all-time high of about one-quarter of the entire budget under the previous government of Prime Minister Deuba--remains to be seen. Basnet's other comments, however, constitute a significant departure from standard RNA briefings, and may have been colored by his bearing responsibility for the debacle at Arghakhanchi in September (Ref B). Nonetheless, his assessment that after nearly a year in the field the RNA has made little headway against the Maoists--and in some respects has even lost ground--is a sobering one--and stands in marked contrast to the upbeat assessment he gave the PACOM assessment team last April.

MALINOWSKI